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lage, Dengler was questioned in broken French by a Communist official, but the young lieutenant—following the U.S. military code—gave only his name, rank, serial number and date of birth. He was handed a prepared statement condemning the U.S. and told that he must sign it. When he refused, he was beaten with sticks. Still he refused to sign, and finally Dengler was beaten unconscious. When he awoke, he was tied behind a water buffalo, then dragged over stubble and sharp rocks until once again he fell unconscious.

Ants' Nest: Still, Dengler refused to talk; and on the eighth night, while his guards were asleep, he slipped his bonds and escaped. His freedom was short-lived, for next afternoon, while Dengler drank from a water hole, he was recaptured by the Pathet Lao. An-

and while his guards were eating, stole four guns. The other prisoners had freed themselves and after a brief exchange of fire with the guards, they fled into the jungle, Dengler in company with Air Force Lt. Duane Martin.

Burst of Energy: Martin soon was stricken with malaria, and Dengler himself developed a case of jaundice. But day after day, the two men stumbled through the jungle, sleeping in abandoned villages, eating snails they found along the way and bits of rice they had taken from prison. Martin grew steadily weaker, and on the seventeenth day of their escape, a Laotian villager suddenly leaped from a hut and struck him twice with a long, curved machete. One blow nearly severed Martin's neck, and the weakened Dengler, summoning up a burst of energy, dove into the bush and



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Navy pilot Dengler: At the time of his rescue and as he looks today

The saga of Dieter Dengler began on Feb. 1, when the German-born, U.S.-naturalized Navy pilot took off from the deck of the carrier Ranger and headed for his first mission over North Vietnam. It was a murky morning, and as the 28-year-old lieutenant rolled in against his targets, heavy ground fire tore into his right wing. Fighting to keep control of the crippled plane, Dengler headed across the border into nearby Laos and crash-landed in a small clearing. Dazed, and bleeding from a cut behind the ear, he heard shouting nearby, then headed into the jungle brush. Next morning, however, Dengler ran head-on into two armed men dressed in U.S.-style military clothing. They were, unfortunately, members of the Communist Pathet Lao. Dengler was their prisoner.

Over the next eight days, the Laotians led the U.S. officer from village to village, displaying him to peasants who came out of the surrounding woods to stare. At night, Dengler was spread-eagled and staked to the ground, an easy mark for the swarming leeches and mosquitoes. Once, he was tied to a tree while his Pathet Lao captors fired away, trying to see how close they could come with their bullets. In another incident,

gry at his escape and his refusal to sign a statement, they then hung the young officer upside down from a tree for five hours and began to beat him. They also, Dengler reported later in his rough English, took an ants' nest and "set it over your face and just want to make you sign the statement." He never did.

For a time, North Vietnamese soldiers took over as Dengler's guards, but then they delivered him back to the Pathet Lao in a stockade deep in the jungle. Six other American prisoners were there, and Dengler immediately began to plot an escape. Some of the others advised waiting for the spring monsoon, but as April, May and June passed without the drenching rains, Dengler and some of the others became restive. Food became scarce, and the prisoners—racked with dysentery—devoured rats and snakes. Finally, fearful that the guards might be planning to kill them, the Americans decided to make the break. On the night of June 29, Dengler worked his way out

fled. Four more days he wandered, during which time Dengler lost consciousness twenty or thirty times. With what may have been his last strength, he fashioned a crude SOS with strips of parachute material he found. And then, miraculously, 22 days after his escape, he was spotted on the ground by a U.S. Skyraider pilot; within minutes, a U.S. helicopter was on its way to pluck the exhausted Dengler, down from his normal 157 pounds to a cadaverous 98, out of the Laotian jungle.

That was on July 20, and last week, after being flown back to the U.S. for seven weeks of recuperation, Lt. Dieter Dengler met the press in San Diego. "They wanted me—they wanted all of us—to die," the handsome flier related, "and as I indicated, we'd rather die free in a bush than those guys not feeding us, or shooting us, and I wanted to be free . . . I wanted to see my mother again . . . and I wanted to see my friends again. I wanted to fly again . . . Man, it is great to be alive."